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SUBJECT: ARGENTINE PRESIDENT KIRCHNER ENGAGES CONSTRUCTIVELY WITH
CODEL ENGEL

¶1. (SBU) Summary and introduction: Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK) engaged enthusiastically for an hour in her office February 21 with visiting U.S. Congressional delegation headed by Representative Eliot Engel (D-NY), chairman of the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, and the Ambassador. In the very positive, upbeat meeting, the codel congratulated the President on Argentina's economic recovery, and she drew attention to employment gains and other positive social indicators. They reviewed the potential for greater cooperation in areas such as science and technology, including renewable energy. The codel raised concerns about Iranian political activities in the region, and the President promised to combat vigorously anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination and said she would fight terrorism "out of conviction." The codel urged passage of legislation criminalizing trafficking in persons, and Rep. Engel made a pitch for recognition of Kosovo's independence. CFK expressed her admiration for the United States' bipartisan practices and her desire to work to improve bilateral relations. The Casa Rosada gave high-profile media attention to the meeting, and Ambassador-designate Timerman told the Ambassador subsequently that CFK was enthused about prospects for relaunching relations. End summary.

¶2. (U) U.S. participants included Representatives Jerry Weller (R-IL), Gene Greene (D-TC), Maurice Hinchey (D-NY), Virginia Foxx (R-NC), and State DAS Joel Starr. GOA participants included Chief of Cabinet Alberto Fernandez, Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana, and Argentine Ambassador to the United States Hector Timerman.

CFK on Argentina's Economic Recovery

¶3. (SBU) Rep. Engel congratulated President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK) on winning the elections. He said that growing up in a blue-collar family instilled in him the belief that government's role is to improve the lives of working people. CFK's political record demonstrated to him that she shared the same perspective. Rep. Weller added that he was a big supporter of female participation in political life, noting that he was married to Zury Rios Sosas, a leading member of the Guatemalan Congress. CFK described her election as Argentina's first democratically-elected female President as "eventful", and noted that what was even more "remarkable" was Argentina's economic recovery from the 2001-02 economic crisis. She cited several GOA socio-economic achievements accomplished during the administration of her husband, former President Nestor Kirchner: 1) Argentina's unemployment fell from 24% to 7.5%; 2) salaried workers earned the equivalent of 34% of GDP in 2003 and now earned 41%; and 3) the value of Argentina's exports grew 67% in the last year. Rep. Hinchey commented that congratulations are overdue for Argentina's economic success.

CFK Desire to Expand Energy and S&T Cooperation

14. (SBU) Rep. Weller and Rep. Hinchey both expressed the code's desire to build the US-Argentine relationship. Weller expressed appreciation for GOA efforts to combat the drug trade and terrorism, as well as its ongoing commitment to rebuild Haiti. Hinchey then asked what the USG could do to improve the bilateral relationship. CFK noted that when she was a guest at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, she participated in a meeting for foreign visitors hosted by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. According to CFK, participants in the meeting concluded that the U.S. was not paying enough attention to Latin America. CFK said she agreed with that assessment.

15. (SBU) CFK said there were a number of areas where the U.S. and Argentina could cooperate more, such as in the areas of science and technology. She added that she had just created a Ministry of Science and Technology. When Hinchey asked about Argentina's energy situation, CFK stated that they are trying to diversify their energy sources and move away from over-reliance on natural gas and oil. This is another area for more U.S.-Argentine cooperation. Rep. Greene noted that the U.S., like Argentina needs to diversify its power sources. He stated that wind power has great potential in southern Argentina, and that a number of U.S. companies are working in this area. "We know that decreasing the use of coal and petroleum is better for the environment, and we need to focus on developing natural gas, wind, and nuclear power," he stated. CFK agreed.

CFK: LatAm will Reject Iranian Propaganda by Instinct

16. (SBU) Turning to Iran, Weller observed that no nation in the Western Hemisphere has suffered more than Argentina from Iran-sponsored terrorism and praised CFK for being a strong advocate for the Jewish community. He raised the U.S. Congress's concern over Bolivian President Evo Morales' February 18 announcement that Iran will open a regional television station in Bolivia. He cautioned that the channel could be used as a vehicle to broadcast anti-Semitic propaganda.

17. (SBU) CFK indicated she was not aware of the potential TV broadcasts but recalled that she had served on the congressional joint committee charged with investigating the terrorist bombings of the Israeli Embassy in 1992 and the AMIA Jewish cultural center in 1994. She downplayed the concern over the possibility of the Iranian TV channel being used to spread anti-Semitism propaganda, saying that Latin American would reject this "by instinct." "Latin America has a lot of problems, but anti-Semitism is not one of them," she insisted. She noted that Argentina had just hosted an Arab-Latin American Summit and claimed that the Saudi Foreign Minister told her he was "amazed at how well Muslims, Jews, and Christians exist in Argentina." She noted that the Jewish people have suffered throughout history, and that others have suffered persecution as well, not just Jews. She assured the delegation that she would "guarantee" that Argentina would never accept policies that discriminate on the basis of religion, color, gender, or sexual orientation. "I am very passionate about this," she said, adding that she did not believe anti-Jewish ideas could take root today in Argentina and said Argentina would remain strongly committed in the fight against terrorism. We do this not just because we have been victims but out of conviction, she concluded.

18. (SBU) CFK noted that she was invited last year to speak at the Venezuelan Jewish Community's 40th anniversary celebration and was aware of their fear of pressure on them. Engel expressed his appreciation for CFK's efforts to help the embattled Jewish community in Venezuela. He indicated that he had also been invited to visit Caracas, but had not yet accepted the invitation due to conflicting advice on whether or not his visit would help or hurt Venezuela's Jewish community.

Trafficking in Persons

¶9. (SBU) Rep. Foxx said that she is a conservative Republican but also a champion of women's rights and a member of the Women's Caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives. The U.S. Congress was strongly supportive of global efforts to combat trafficking in persons, particularly education programs to prevent people from falling prey to traffickers, assistance to protect victims, and greater efforts to prosecute traffickers. In that last connection, she understood the Argentine Congress was working on federal anti-trafficking legislation, and expressed support for its prompt passage and implementation. CFK acknowledged that it was a legislative priority.

Venezuelan Agents in Miami

¶10. (SBU) Rep. Engel said he agreed with CFK that the U.S. had not paid enough attention to Latin America, a region we neglect at our own peril. He said he hoped we could work together on this, despite the bad start because of the misunderstanding over the Miami court case against four aliens charged with acting as unregistered agents of a foreign power in the United States. The way the case was publicly presented "pained us," he said. The case would follow its due course, he added, because that's the way our system works. Whatever happens in that court case, he and his subcommittee would regard Argentina as a partner and seek to work closely to strengthen relations.

Kosovo and the Malvinas/Falklands

¶11. (SBU) Rep. Engel thanked the President for Argentine cooperation in security issues, including the tri-border area, counter-narcotics, and counter-terrorism, and then he raised Kosovo. Acknowledging Argentina's sensitivities (related to its claim to the Falklands/Malvinas), Engel noted that he had visited Kosovo 10-12 times. He took an interest in Kosovo because when he first got involved in politics, Albanian-American constituents started educating him about the extent of repression against ethnic Albanians in the region. He had long supported Kosovo independence, and he hoped we could address Argentine concerns so that it, too, could help Kosovo.

¶12. (SBU) CFK said recognition of Kosovo independence was problematic due to Argentina's need to avoid doing or saying anything that could undermine its claim to the Malvinas/Falklands. While the GOA could recognize and honor the U.S. position, its overriding concern was to protect its claim to the

Malvinas/Falklands, which was "enshrined in our constitution." She noted that the GOA had been trying to get HMG to family members of Argentine troops killed in the 1982 war to charter a flight to the islands to visit the tombs of their loved ones. She said HMG had yet to grant this "humanitarian gesture" because of resistance from the islanders.

Bilateral Relations and Argentina's New Ambassador

¶12. (SBU) CFK thanked Engel for his remarks regarding the Miami court case, which she considered an unfortunate incident. She said the codel's visit was "a very important gesture," which she appreciated and that she wanted to improve bilateral relations, which is one of the reasons Hector Timerman would soon be Argentina's Ambassador in Washington. Engel said he hoped to make a positive contribution to the bilateral relationship. He said he looked forward to working with Timerman. CFK said Timerman was a close advisor and good friend, "one of my most intelligent appointments." She credited Timerman for her first visit to Israel, when she received a human rights award from the University of Jerusalem. CFK recalled that Timerman had been an exile in the United States, became an American citizen, and eventually relinquished that citizenship in order to take up responsibilities as Argentina's consul general in New York City. She said he remained deeply grateful to the United States and would work diligently to help the bilateral relationship.

A Fan of the American Way

¶14. (SBU) CFK drew the meeting to a close with praise for the United States. "Don't forget -- Argentina's Constitution is a copy of the U.S. Constitution," she said. Sadly, Argentina had lost its bipartisan system when it "exploded" in the 2001 crisis. That bipartisanship had never worked so well in Argentina as it has in the United States. She said she greatly admired the civic spirit of the United States, particularly the commitment, once an election was over, to pull together behind the winner, and the willingness to put country over party, national interests over partisanship.

¶15. (SBU) Comment: CFK had her media advisors give prominent attention to the meeting, and it was widely and positively covered locally. GOA Ambassador-designate Timerman told the Ambassador February 22 that he had met later in the day with CFK and that she was very upbeat about the meeting and about relaunching efforts to improve bilateral relations with the U.S.

WAYNE